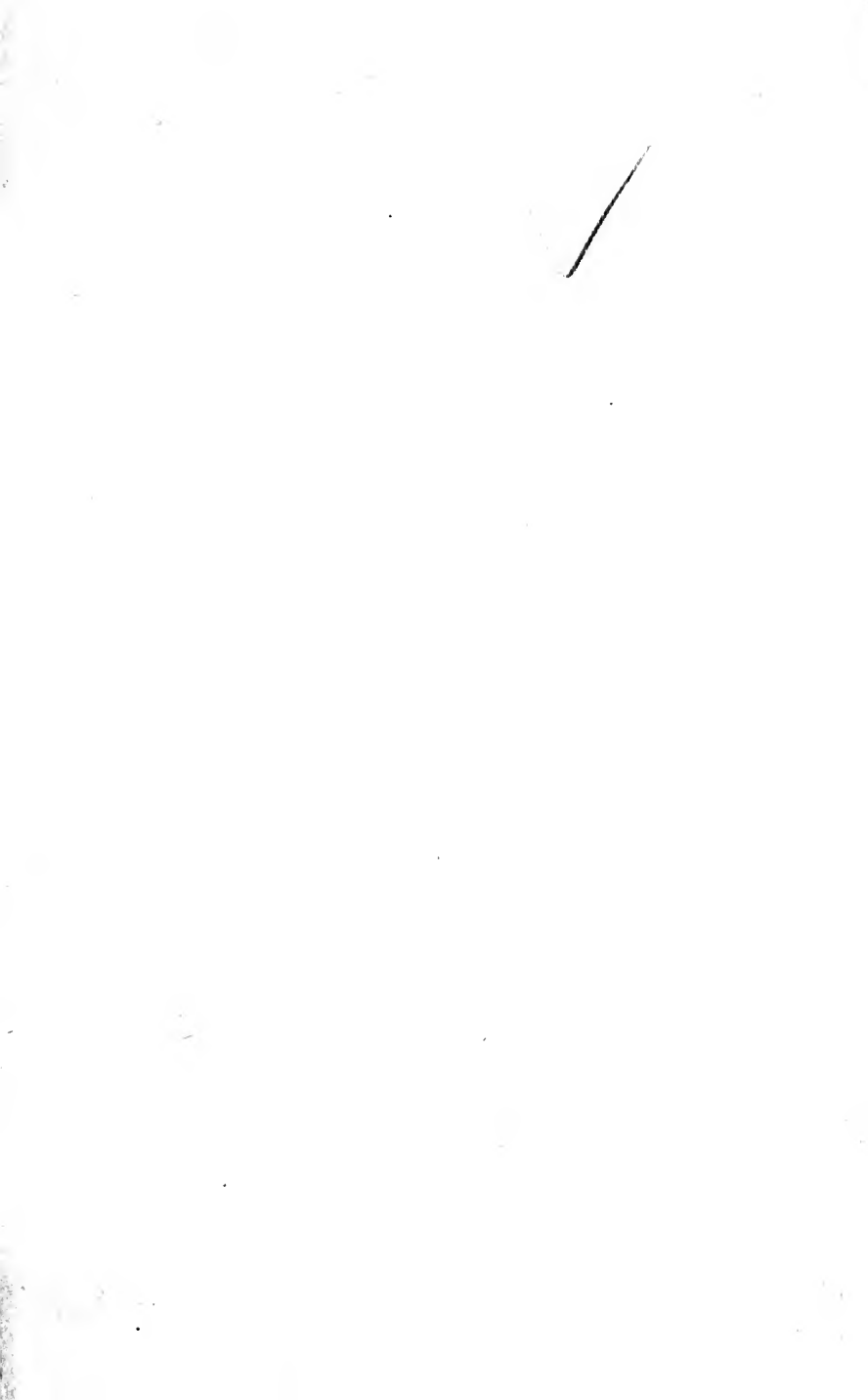






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The Eastern Question Association.

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PAPERS on THE EASTERN QUESTION.

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No. 2.

RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF  
THE EASTERN QUESTION.

BY THE

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## RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF THE EASTERN QUESTION.



THE insurgent and disaffected inhabitants of the European provinces of Turkey are Christians, and the Turks who claim to rule them are Mussulmans. Two great religions have thus been brought into deadly conflict with each other. Looking at the struggle in Eastern Europe from the religious point of view, we see on the one side followers of the Cross, on the other side followers of the Crescent. Is this all that English Christians need to know about the matter? Are we to take for granted that it is our duty, because we are Christians, to sympathise with our struggling fellow-Christians, and to help them to throw off the yoke of an alien race and religion?

It is inevitable that some account should be taken of the fact that the disaffected subjects of Turkey are Christians. There are persons in this country—others as well as Jews—to whom this fact is a reason for lending their sympathies to the Turks. There are many more who have been primarily induced by it to wish well to the cause of the insurgents. It is reasonable that such ties as those of a common religion should be felt deeply. No one will think less respectfully of the prosperous English Jews for sympathising with oppressed Jews in Roumania or elsewhere ; no

one ought to think it strange that the cries of suffering Christians should touch the hearts of their fellow-Christians. Nor ought we to make an effort to quench our instinctive feeling when we are reminded that these Bosnian and Bulgarian Christians, though they bear the common name, profess a Christianity of a very different type from our own. There is neither folly nor injustice in thinking more of the points in which we agree than of those in which we differ. We have a right to believe that in any communion to which the name of Christ is supremely sacred, and which confesses the paramount authority of the New Testament, however it may have been degraded by superstitious corruptions, there are objects of appeal and sources of moral influence which justify the hope of a regenerated future. It is surely the fanaticism of philosophic impartiality which can expect as much new life for a corrupt Mohammedan world from a recurrence to the primary traditions of the Koran, as we might reasonably hope to see beginning to stir in the dry branches of the Eastern Church, if its priests and people would turn with opened eyes and teachable hearts to the Christ of the Gospels—their own Christ. English Christians cannot forget that a Reformation is possible. And therefore it may be freely admitted that the professed religion of these millions who are either defiantly casting off the Turkish yoke or moving their shoulders uneasily under it, does something to warm our hearts into goodwill towards them. The very fact that the vital instincts of resentment and independence are bursting into expression, suggests a hope of religious reform. The free national spirit is akin to the love of truth. Men who are facing risks in defence of domestic honour and security are in the way to rise above servile superstitions.





We may frankly confess, therefore, that, as Christians, we feel impatient when we see a Christian population trampled upon by Mussulman rulers. But it is no spirit of religious partisanship which has set the mass of the people of this country against the Turkish dominion as it exists and works in Europe. We are open to the reproach that English Christianity is so rent by the divisions of sects and parties that we do not willingly unite under its common banner. It is often a cause of sadness and complaint that Churchmen and Dissenters, the High Church and the Low, are so little responsive to appeals which address them as all Christians together. But now we see men of all schools and communions united in the pro-Christian cause. The bishop stands shoulder to shoulder with the Dissenting minister, the Ritualist clergyman with the promoter of the Public Worship Act. The truth is that our common humanity feels itself outraged ; and the religious mind amongst us is still, thank God, profoundly humane. We are believers in the Son of Man, and in proportion to the strength of our faith we make it a matter of conscience to care for the sacred human interests.

If the operations known as the Bulgarian Atrocities or Horrors had been a unique and solitary outbreak of exasperation and panic, they were, even in that case, of a nature to justify the revulsion of feeling in relation to Turkey which occurred in this country and throughout European Christendom. If a man whose character has been previously irreproachable is betrayed into a single act of murderous or lustful violence, he must suffer the penalty ; and, though human compassion will pity him, it will not excuse him. I deny myself here the use of any damnatory term or epithet to describe the acts by which the feeble Bulgarian

attempt at insurrection was trampled out; but I can imagine that it may become a melancholy necessity to restate in some detail what then took place. If people affirm that nothing was done in Bulgaria much worse than has been habitually done by the Russians in Poland, in Turkestan, and elsewhere, or than was done by the English in the suppression of the Indian mutiny, it can only be supposed that they refused, with the natural loathing of humane and delicate minds, to read the authentic reports of the doings of the Turks in that province, or else that these things have faded with strange quickness from their memories. But those who happened to know anything of the general condition of the Christian provinces of Turkey during recent years, or who have since made it their business to inquire into the customary character of the Turkish administration, are aware that the Christians of those provinces lead lives continually exposed to insults, wrongs, and outrages such as no man can bear whose spirit is not crushed, and for which they can obtain no redress. If these allegations can be disproved, the English people have been misled by statements of which the Turks have good right to complain. Feelings and policy should rest upon fact and evidence; and the really important question in this whole business is whether the local Turkish administration is hopelessly corrupt and oppressive or not. But the charge is not only sustained by irresistible evidence, it is virtually admitted by the accused. The very promises and new decrees of the Porte imply that the complaints of the Christians are well founded. The answer returned contemptuously by all Europe to these Turkish offers of amendment is, that their hollowness is too well known. The Turks can promise nothing, decree nothing, which they have

not repeatedly promised and decreed before. Men accept such professions once or twice, but in time they grow tired of them. There is no reasonable prospect whatever of any substantial and lasting amendment of the condition of the Christians if the Turks are left in unrestricted power over them. What should make things better in the future than they have been in the past? The Turkish Empire is not in a more vigorous state; its finances are not more flourishing; it is not less at the mercy of venal officials and a licentious soldiery. Its Christian subjects, struggling against hopeless misgovernment, cry out for sympathy and assistance. If man is ever to help his brother man in trouble, why should we turn a deaf ear to these suffering millions?

The question might be asked, "Suppose that the positions were reversed—that the Turks were Christians and the Slavs were Mussulmans—would you be so ready to plead the cause of the oppressed?" We ought not to shrink from the question; and my answer would be—I hope that Englishmen in general would be still more indignant than they are now. I am sure there are many of us who would feel so acutely the shame brought on the Christian profession and cause by such iniquities, that our simply human hatred of them would be stimulated by an eager desire to clear our religion from the discredit of them. I cannot deny that cruel and unjust deeds have been done by Englishmen in their dealings with less civilised races. The memory of these things may reasonably make us slow in condemning others. Our sympathy with those who now suffer at the hands of Turks should quicken our consciences in the appreciation of any injury we ourselves may be doing, or may be tempted to do, to weaker populations. But if it were

reported here that in the remotest part of Asia some thousands of natives were receiving from Englishmen anything approaching the treatment which has been the daily lot of the Christian millions in European Turkey, does any one doubt that there would be an outburst in England of honest and effectual indignation against those who brought so great a dishonour on our country and our religion?

Much scorn has been cast, during the recent agitation of this question, upon sentimental benevolence. Indignation against Turkish violence has been represented as the luxury of those who like to have their feelings stimulated by sensational descriptions. Contrasts have been drawn between the politics of popular emotion and the prudent wisdom of statesmanship. Let it be admitted, without hesitation, that enthusiastic meetings are not fit to be entrusted with the administration of our foreign policy; that it would not do to commence a crusade of redress whenever we hear of wrongs or cruelties perpetrated in any part of the world. Let us listen with the utmost respect to the cautions of prudence. It would be a folly to embroil the world in the attempt to remedy some local evil; and the passionate enthusiasm of ignorant and irresponsible persons is not incapable of committing such a folly. There is some danger therefore, let it be frankly admitted, in such demonstrations of feeling as those of the last half-year in favour of the Christian subjects of Turkey. The work of ministers and diplomatists is not to be set aside by popular emotion. But, on the other hand, to suppose that the world either is or ought to be governed by ministers and diplomatists is a delusion—a graver delusion, perhaps, than that of those who believe too hastily in public meetings. The world goes by motive power, and the motive

power is supplied, not by the wariness of statesmen, but by the convictions and desires of populations. These convictions and desires are not always noble; it is not in their nature to be diplomatic: but they move the machinery; and where would the engine-driver be without steam? Now and then some great minister of state—more of a hero than a diplomatist—has an exceptional opportunity of forcing on, by his individual energy, an important step in the development of human history. But of late years the power of making changes for the better in the condition of nations and of the world has been chiefly diffused amongst the general populations. Every decade of history convicts the shortsightedness of those who imagine that the arts of diplomacy possess the final control over human affairs. Revolutions, wars, reforms, have all been instinct with emotional impulse, sometimes simply patriotic, often strongly religious. Let any one compare for a moment what has been done by religion in the world, and what by the professional knowledge and skill of ministers of state!

It is not wonderful that men who are born to be bureaucratic agents, and all those who are for keeping things quiet, have a distrust and dislike of popular movements. These troublesome phenomena disarrange their calculations. It is natural that such persons should make the worst of the froth that is thrown up by a philanthropic agitation, of the ignorance of the many, of the disproportion between the aims of platforms and practical possibilities, of the interested element which mixes itself with every public-spirited movement. But the abler kind of minister respects the resolute convictions and ardent desires which are indispensable to a great policy; he does not think himself

humiliated by the sense of a force in such motives superior to his own skill ; he will probably be in sympathy with the living part of his nation, and he likes to feel a high-mettled steed under him. A strongly excited national will, and a strong minister acting as its instrument, may do wrong things. I am not in the least contending that a policy of religious emotion must necessarily be a good one. But the excitement of religious feeling has been the historical method of bringing about many of those events which later generations care to remember and to study.

It is surely apparent to the most sober-minded view that great things are yet to be done by the action of true Christian sentiment operating upon international affairs. Our sense of duty is notoriously behindhand in its appreciation of the dealings of nation with nation. In domestic politics it has become a nearly general conviction that we ought to be governed by the aims of a high Christian morality, that the strong ought to care for the weak, and that the well-being of the community ought to prevail over the interests of the few. But we are hardly awakened to the idea that, if the laws of morality have any force at all, they must bind the conduct of the larger societies called nations as much as that of individuals and classes. Great honour is due to a few men, who without appealing to the Christian traditions have made it their business to affirm strenuously and uncompromisingly the subjection of all politics, foreign as well as domestic, to the laws of morality. But it is in this sphere that Christianity ought to speak with pre-eminent authority and power. It was its glory in the beginning to overleap the barriers dividing nations and tongues, and to proclaim a unity of men under one God and Father of all. Catholicity belongs to the primary idea of the

Christian religion. The more Christian a man is, the more he ought to feel drawn towards men of other races and countries. For the discharge of all duty towards others, we need that spirit of self-suppression and service which is the characteristically Christian spirit. Undoubtedly, if self-abnegation is to be practised in the dealings of a nation with other nations, it must be practised under somewhat different conditions from those which the Gospel prescribes for individuals. A nation must be more careful of its safety, for reasons on which I need not here enlarge, than a thoroughly Christian man would be of his. National policy would never be bound, I imagine, by the most exacting standard of Christian duty to be what might justly be called reckless or Quixotic. But it seems to me certain beyond the possibility of denial that, if we are to think of nations as having duties and virtues, we must desire that the action of our own country should be marked by unselfishness and generosity as well as by a narrow justice. We shall never attain to the highest blessings in store for humanity, nor shall we realise the full scope and power of our religion, until nations determine to judge their public and mutual conduct by the Christian ideal. The path, for example, towards the international peace which is now so much desired, is not through a more enlightened and sensitive regard to self-interest, but through loyalty to the common Master of all, and conscientious devotion to the well-being of mankind.

Let those, then, who are conscious of a religious desire that the power of this country should be used for the liberation of the oppressed Christians in Turkey, assure themselves that there is nothing weakly sentimental, nothing but what is rational and in harmony with the best statesmanship and serviceable to the

highest public ends, in the utmost fervour of such a desire. A longing like this belongs to the vital and purifying breath of human existence. Alas for a country when its sons have no other political aspirations but those of a narrow and sordid patriotism! The mood that would cynically shut out pity and kindness and enthusiasm from the external policy of a country like ours would be as the frost of old age creeping over its energies, and cramping them in ignoble impotence.

The weight of their responsibilities must needs press heavily upon the representatives of a state at a crisis like the present. It is their business to keep their eyes open to all possibilities, to watch with some jealousy the action of other states, and to be ready to thwart insidious and dangerous designs. When a country is in the position now occupied by England, which has nothing to gain by a disturbance of existing relations, and could scarcely fail to suffer some injury from a European war, it is natural that it should be a main object of its ministers to preserve the *status quo*, and that the undefinable risks attending the subversion of an established government should cause them to shrink from any action which might contribute to it. It is a very serious thing, beyond all question, to disturb the equilibrium of such a body as the congeries of European Powers. It is quite true that no one can say what may happen if Turkey is brought to bay, and resolves to fight desperately for its empire and independence. To promote such a result with a light heart would be criminal folly. But the religious sentiment of a thoughtful people has this advantage over the apprehensive wariness of the diplomatist, that it consists essentially of faith. We Christians cannot think of the world as subject to chance. We habitually assume that human



affairs are under the control of a righteous Providence. In this faith it is natural to act with a certain disregard of consequences. In such a condition as that of European Turkey—the old dominion, established and maintained by the sword, crumbling to pieces through internal corruption ; the oppressed populations at once so angered by lawless violence, and so stimulated by new hope, that they refuse to be patient any longer—we see a Divine judgment beginning. We deem it safer to side with justice and freedom insurgent, though we cannot foresee what the exact issues of the insurrection may be, than to use our influence to preserve the *status quo* which crushes them.

At the same time it would be affectation to assume that any policy which it has been proposed that England should adopt with regard to this Eastern Question would make a grave demand upon the faith that stands by a good cause and pursues noble ends in defiance of possible consequences. The boldest course suggested is, in the opinion of many shrewd and experienced public men, the safest. That England should join with Russia in using force to compel the Turks to submit to restrictions which united Europe believes to be reasonable and necessary, is probably the most considerate mode of dealing with the Turks, and the best calculated to prevent any dangerous convulsion. It is idle to suppose that a settlement can be effected on any terms which will not wound the self-respect of the Turks and diminish their power. It is not pleasant to a generous mind to see a nation humiliated, whatever its misdoings may have been ; and the Turk is admittedly at his best when fighting against an equal or superior foe. It is an act of high policy to disarm the Turk as the arbitrary ruler of Christians, and we are accustomed to

feel some admiration for an offender who shows spirit and courage even against the representatives of justice. But a painful struggle may be averted by the use of strength so overwhelming as to make submission a matter of course. It would be an easy task for Russia and England together to reduce the Porte to instant submission. This policy, therefore, has very strong recommendations for those who shrink from bloodshed and convulsions. But there has been nothing impracticable or Quixotic in the temper or demands of those Englishmen who have advocated the liberation of the Christian subjects of Turkey. We are most of us well aware that we do not possess the information which would justify us in affirming peremptorily and in detail what this country ought to do. We are anxious to learn, and willing to be instructed by any one who has special knowledge. Whatever may be alleged with plausibility as to the attitude and language of some few persons, we deny that there is anything sentimental or fanatical in the general tone of those, for example, who took part in the St. James's Hall Conference.

But having kept our eyes open for many months, and being conscious of no interest or prepossession which should warp our minds from the honest desire to see right enforced and wrong redressed, and feeling the obligation that lies upon our country to do its duty in the sight of God, we cannot doubt that we see with sufficient clearness the ends at which we are bound to aim. Our own Government, starting with being avowedly pro-Turkish, has given its concurrence in the most decided manner to the demands made by Russia on behalf of its co-religionists. Not a state in Europe justifies the *non possumus* of Turkey. There still remains

to the army of the Porte the task which it was so slow in accomplishing, to beat down the resistance of Servia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Montenegro ; or, if Servia and Montenegro are bought off by propitiatory terms of peace, there is the original insurrection in the other two provinces to be dealt with. The peasants of Bosnia and Herzegovina have not yet been reduced to submission. Russia, not to speak of its sovereign's verbal engagement, will be no more able than before to look on and see the last embers of their courageous revolt extinguished in blood. All the signs in the political heavens portend continued war and tumults until the Christians are secured against Mohammedan license. We cannot believe that England has permission from Heaven to play the *fainéant* in this business. It is to the protection of England that Turkey has owed the power to misgovern for the last twenty years. Our own hands are not clean ; we have some reparation to make to offended justice. If it has been right to use our influence and material force to sustain Turkey against what we believed to be the aggressive ambition of Russia, it must be right now, when all reasonable fear of that Power has been dispelled, to recognise the responsibility we have thus assumed, and to transfer our protection from the corrupt oppressor to the populations blighted by his rule.



